

12th Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

The text for this week — Who do You Say that I am? — is a pivot point for Matthew's gospel. This gospel is known for its positivist stance on the story of the disciples. Despite their failures in insight, they are blessed because they are *chosen* — and in being chosen, they have insight, again, despite their failures in insight. Jesus is speaking to them about his understanding of himself and his mission. And this knowledge brings conflict.

An undercurrent in the text is this question of Jesus. He is asking a question that he doesn't seem to know the answer to: who do people say that I am? And then he asks it again, modifying the 'people' to 'you'. How true this can be for so many of us: caught in the complexity between how we perceive ourselves, how others perceive us, how our friends perceive us, and how — if this is a question we ask — God perceives us.

Such tensions hold us, and pull us apart. And it is in the conflict of such tensions (as well as the harmony) that we find the energy for life.

Text

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Comment

When I was a child, I was anxious about how people perceived me. I don't think I was unusual. I wonder sometimes if — in an era where parenting seems to have increased in its communication of affection — if this is the same today. I'm sure it is; for some, if not for many.

Jesus, in this text, is asking his disciples what “people” think of him. People, in Greek, is anthropos, and it is a word found all over the gospel of Matthew. A brief run-through of but some highlights the word's many functions here: [anthropos] does not live by bread alone; follow me and I will make you fishers of [anthropos]; if salt loses its taste it is thrown out and trampled under [anthropos]; let your light shine before [anthropos]; if you forgive [anthropos] their trespasses, your heavenly father will forgive you; do under [anthropos] what you would have them do unto you; [anthropos] were amazed, saying ‘What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?; for the Son of [anthropos] is Lord of the sabbath; so for three days and three nights the Son of [anthropos] will be in the heart of the earth; and here — who do [anthropos] say that the son of [anthropos] is?

This question is, obviously, a foundational point in the gospel text: Jesus asking his chosen friends about how he is spoken of in public, and of how he is thought of in private by those he's chosen.

Deeper than the christological theme to this text is, however, a question that many people ask, if not most people, if not all people. Who am I? Who do you see me as? Who do others see me as? Who do I see I am? There are no easy answers to this. And the answer — or, to be accurate, the answers — is found in living, rather than in curating, a life. This is a conflict. To be caught between what I understand me to be, and what I think others understand me to be. Sometimes my self-understanding might be derogatory, other times indulgent. Sometimes I might place myself at the centre of a query that is not mine to occupy, other times I might hate myself enough that I am reluctant to speak to the very questions of my own survival. So many of us are caught in these tensions. Truths are found in relation to others — learning to view ourselves not just through our own lens, but through the lens of friends; sometimes this will lift us up; sometimes this will ask us to diminish, or de-centre.

Hidden in the heart of this christological text is, too, an instance where Jesus is asking a question out of curiosity. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” It is an oddly phrased question — that [anthropos] of ‘people’ and the repeated and slightly formal third-person way of referring to himself as the Son of [anthropos]? When he comes to asking the question directly of his friends, he modifies both usages of [anthropos]. He asks “but who do you say that I am?” Commentaries abound on the theological project at the heart of this scene in Matthew's gospel — you can read them in your own time. What intrigues me is the moment of vulnerability, where the character of Jesus is asking — with curiosity rather than self-consciousness, it seems to me — a question about how he is perceived. He wants to hear. He wants to understand how he's understood.

Sometimes I wish one of the disciples had asked him back. Who do you say that you are? How would he have spoken? What would he have said? *When I as a child I thought I was... but now I think of myself as...* Or: *yesterday I thought I was ... and today I wonder if I am ...* What pluralities might have existed in his mind? What coordinates did he take to understand? Did his own prayer anchor him in his self-understanding? Can we speak of his doubt, or desire, or debate, his reluctance, his options or his objections as we explore? And — even more — what is the impact that self-understanding has on action? How do we believe the thing that helps us act in the world with an integrity indigenous to our giftedness and responsibilities? How do we nurture an inner life that brings us to the homework, humility, honesty and honour of our outer lives?

We offer the Spirituality of Conflict reflections as a way of considering how to

approach everyday conflicts with the practice and imagination of spirituality. This, surely, is an everyday conflict: who am I? And what do I do today? And how do I do today? And what is it that I think about myself? And how do others think of me? And how do I live today with something approaching integrity and courage in the face of all else?

This conflict is not one to be resolved, finally. It is a chord, on an instrument, to be tuned through the everyday practice of the inner life in tune with the outer life. It is an answer that is lived rather than defined. We are in great company. Let us pray.

Response

Over dinner tables, phone calls, zoom calls or diary-entries, consider:

When was a moment of self-understanding for me? What was it like? What did it bring me to?

And then: when was another moment of self-understanding for me?

And another.

And another.

It is in such reflections that we might build the life that holds conversation between the private and the public. It is to such integrity that we are called.

Prayer

Curious Jesus

You asked your friends what they'd heard
and what they thought.
And even though they answered,
they didn't ask you back.

We wonder what you'd say.

Ask us questions, questioning one.
And listen as we listen to the answers we offer.
And listen as we ask you.
And answer us, in the strange ways you answer.

Because it is in such questions
that we might discover

some of the calls of our lives;
calls that we must answer
in the company of friends.

Amen.

Further Reading

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey